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Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students

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Life purposes of Iranian secondary school students

Abstract

This paper examines Iranian secondary students' ($N = 336$) life purposes. Economic and hedonistic life goals were the most valued. Relationships in terms of having a family and children were also appreciated. In the students' views, religiousness was associated with social goals such as helping others in need and volunteering in the community. Gender differences in students' life goals occurred only in aesthetic goals, which applied more to girls than to boys. K-Cluster analysis identified four purpose profiles: self-oriented dabblers, beyond-the-self dreamers, self-oriented life goal pursuers, and purposeful youth. The dominant profile among the youth was self-oriented life goal pursuer (37%). The study validated Damon's (2008) conceptual work on purpose profiles in a previously unstudied cultural context.

Key words: Purpose in life, students, secondary school, purposefulness, Iran

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Introduction

Damon's theory of youth purpose

Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) define purpose as: “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). Purpose must have a specific focus or content that can be evaluated along four dimensions: meaning, intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self (Moran, 2009). One should recognize personally meaningful purposes and be involved in activities that advance that purpose; ultimately, the purpose should profit not only oneself, but also others (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013; Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly 2012). Based on this definition, Damon (2008) identified four groups among American youth: 1) the *purposeful* who have found their purpose and are committed to realizing their purpose, which also benefits others; plus three precursor forms composed of 2) *dreamers* who have identified their purpose but are not involved in activities to attain it; 3) *dabblers* who are involved in some activities toward achieving an aim, but do not seem certain of their commitment; and 4) the *disengaged* who have no sense of direction and are not actively seeking a purpose in life. Furthermore, Moran (2009) differentiated self-oriented and other-oriented dreamers and dabblers as precursor forms of purpose.

Among researchers, there has been growing interest in purpose as a positive indicator motivating young people to take meaningful steps in life. Previous studies indicate that a large number of young people have no sense of direction nor are they taking realistic steps toward a future goal (Damon, 2008; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016). Religion and religiosity can enhance young people's sense of purpose (Aghababaei, & Blachnio, 2014; Tirri & Quinn, 2010). The social, religious, and educational environment can affect purpose as can a person's worldview (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Moran, 2014). Thus, investigation of different

contexts can help determine the varieties of influences on youth purpose across cultures and whether the results found in American studies can be applied to other countries. In this study, we investigate the purposes of Iranian secondary students and how purpose is perceived by both male and female Iranian students.

Iranian educational system supports youth purpose

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, education has been an important means by which Islamic values and principles are disseminated to young people (Hoodfar & Sadar, 2010). In Iran's educational system, the ultimate aim is to prepare students for a "pure life": a life full of divine closeness to God, which ultimately will bring about a "pure society" according to the Holy Quran (Hedayati, Kuusisto, Gholami & Tirri, 2017b). Moral values rooted in Islamic beliefs—such as being religious based on Islamic criteria; being committed to responsibilities and duties to God, self, society, and nature; and being courteous and moral based on Islamic ethics—are the main qualifications that the Iranian educational system hopes to inculcate in students in order to produce a new generation of pious Muslims (Hedayati et al., 2017b). Furthermore, according to the *National Curriculum* (2011), one main goal of moral education is to teach students to prioritize collective benefits over individual benefits. Two subjects—Islamic religious education and the Quran—are included in the *National Curriculum*; however, moral education according to Islamic values is also an implicit part of other subjects (Hedayati et al., 2017a; Hedayati et al., 2017b).

As the educational system is centralized, and all the schools have the same curriculum and textbook, boys and girls experience education similarly (Hedayati et al., 2017b). However, due to the Iranian government's constitution, schools are segregated by gender (Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012). Furthermore, according to Shia Islam, which is the main religion in Iran, boys are not responsible for assuming religious obligations until age 16 (Hedayati et al., 2017a), whereas girls are expected to wear the hijab (Boodman & Tohidi, 1998), pray five

times a day, fast, and assume other religious obligations from the age of 9 (Hedayati et al., 2017a).

To conduct empirical studies in Iran, researchers use philosophical interpretations (purpose as the meaning of life), psychological interpretations (purpose as a positive entity dealing with success in actual activities), or religious interpretations (purpose as moving toward God) (e.g., Alizamani, 2011; Rajabi, 2011; Yazd & Mirzaei, 2017). Iranian youths' purposes have not been a focus of study before. But a comparison of Iranian and Swedish adolescents' well-being using Ryff's (1989) questionnaire found that purpose in life correlated strongly with well-being in Iranians (Garsia & Moradi, 2012). This finding is important because mental health studies show Iranian youth age 12 to 30 suffer from depression, anxiety, stress, and hopelessness, with girls reporting more problems and less happiness than boys (Biabangard & Javadi, 2004; Emami, Ghazinour, Rezaeishiraz, & Richter, 2007; Fouladchang, Kohgard, & Salah, 2010; Hajloo, 2011; Pourmovahed, Deghani, Yassini, Tavangar, & Deghani, 2010).

Family, social relations, and work were the most frequently mentioned sources of meaning of life (Ahmadi, Heidari, Bagherian, & Kashfi, 2016). However, there were significant gender differences. For girls, sources of meaning included emotional relationships, health, personal appearance, art, social confirmation, and freedom of choice. For boys, they were social relationships, social responsibility, leisure time, and family.

In this paper, we address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the life purposes of Iranian secondary school students?
- 2) What kinds of purpose profiles do Iranian secondary school students demonstrate?

Method

Participants and procedure

The structure of basic education is six years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school, and three years of upper secondary school. Participants ($N = 336$) were recruited from two lower secondary schools, one female and one male, in Tehran, Iran, in the spring of 2016. The students were gender balanced (female $n = 174$, male $n = 163$), and from 12 to 16 years of age.

They completed paper questionnaires that had been translated into the students' native language of Farsi. The written instructions were based on the original English questionnaire (Bundick & Tirri, 2014). Since students were young, the researcher, who is a native speaker of Farsi, introduced herself in each class, explained the research, assured students their answers would remain anonymous, gave oral instructions, and provided an opportunity for students to ask about the questionnaire. Although initially there was some concern about a female researcher attending a male school, the researcher's gender was not a problem because men and women interact in organizations outside of schools. In both schools, students and teachers interacted with the researcher in similar ways.

Measures

This study utilized Bundick and Tirri's (2014) operationalization of the components of purpose proposed by Damon et al. (2003) by using the following latent variables: contents of purpose, which also reveal beyond-the-self (BTS) orientation; sense of purpose; and goal-directedness.

The contents of students' purposes were measured with Bundick, Andrews, Jones, Mariano, Bronk, & Damon's (2006) 20-item version of Roberts and Robins' (2000) instrument (Table 1). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not important to me* to 5 = *very important to me*) using the question: "How important are the following goals in your life?" Items are statements like "helping others in need" or "having children" or "being a good writer" or "having a high-paying job." In the original authors' study, items

factor into seven domains: economic, aesthetic, social, relationship/family, political, hedonistic, and religious ($\alpha=.65-.83$). However, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to see how these items related to each other with Iranian students.

Sense of purpose was measured with two scales, *seeking purpose* ($\alpha = .738$) and *finding purpose* ($\alpha = .761$), from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Each scale had five items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item for finding purpose was “My life has a clear sense of purpose.” A sample item for seeking purpose was “I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.”

Goal-directedness was measured with a 9-item version of the Purpose in Life subscale ($\alpha = .748$) of Ryff’s (1989) Psychological Well-Being measure (Bundick & Tirri, 2014). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) to rate items such as “I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.” The scores of six items that were negatively worded were reversed so that 1 indicated low goal directedness and 5 indicated high goal directedness.

Our statistical analyses consisted of an exploratory factor analysis of the life goals list, calculating Pearson’s correlation coefficients to test associations among the life goals factors, sense of purpose scales, and goal-directedness scales. Finally, we ran a K-means cluster analysis to determine purpose profiles and the prevalence of Iranian students within each profile.

Results

Life purposes

Scale scores for the Roberts and Robins (2000) list of life goals first were calculated based on the original authors’ guidelines. But the alpha values of three of the seven original dimensions were low (hedonistic $\alpha=.466$; social $\alpha=.382$; economic $\alpha=.390$). Since the

measure was developed and tested mainly in Western cultures, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to investigate the psychometric properties of the scale in a Middle Eastern context. We used the maximum likelihood method because it is the preferred approach when assumptions of normality are not “severely violated”; e.g., skewness of the items does not exceed 2 and the level of kurtosis is below 7 (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999, p. 283). One item was ambiguous (“having good relationships with my parents and my siblings”: skewness 2.6 and kurtosis 6.3), but we decided to keep the item. However, items “having good relationships with my parents and my siblings” and “having fun” were removed from the model based on low factor loadings ($<.4$). We used direct oblimin for oblique rotation since it was assumed that factors would correlate (Field, 2013). The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis on a mediocre level, KMO = .699 (Field, 2013, p. 685). Six factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser’s criterion of 1.

A five-factor structure appeared to be the most appropriate based on the scree plot. This structure explained 50.69% of the variance. Items clustering on the same factor represented life goals related to *economics and hedonism* ($\alpha = .609$), *family and relationships* ($\alpha = .591$), *social and religious pursuits* ($\alpha = .717$), *aesthetics* ($\alpha = .627$), and *acting in public life* ($\alpha = .536$) (see Table 1). Reliability coefficients were much improved, although some were lower than the ideal of .70 or higher (De Vellis, 2003). However, for exploratory cross-cultural studies in which a measure from one culture is adapted to a new context, sometimes reliability coefficients in the .60 range may be included.

Two items in the *social and religious* factor (“devoting attention to my spiritual life” and “helping others in need”) had relatively high cross-loadings ($>.3$), but these items were included in further analyses since reliability analysis supported the factor structure. In Iran, it is plausible that social responsibility is associated with religion as the holy Quran emphasizes

kindness and charity toward people in need and responsibility to other human beings and nature (Kochuyt, 2009; Nikoomaram & Feizabadi, 2010; Rasool, 2000). Similarly, in Western contexts, religion has been found to play an important role in civic engagement, charity, altruism, and development of prosociality (e.g., Furrow, King, & White, 2010; Moran et al., 2012). Nevertheless, cross-loadings indicate that Iranian students link helping others with financial prosperity, and a spiritual life with close familial relationships.

The *social and religious* factor also was used as an indicator of beyond-the-self (BTS) orientation (see Bundick & Tirri, 2014). Even though social and religious domains do not always signify the *personal* reason why youth consider others (Moran, 2015), these factor's questionnaire items generally are recognized in Iran to orient towards others, community, or a higher power (see Table 1). The differences in female and male students' life goals were analyzed with a t-test.

Among the 20 life aspirations items that participants rated, the single aspiration with the highest rating on average was having good relationships with parents and siblings (see Table 1). However, when categories of purpose (i.e., factors) were considered, Iranian students were more interested in *economic and hedonistic goals* ($M = 4.42$; $SD = .60$) than in goals related to *marriage and having their own children* ($M = 3.85$; $SD = .90$). Students also identified with *social and religious goals* ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .90$). *Aesthetic goals* ($M = 3.18$; $SD = .98$) and aims related to *acting in public life* ($M = 2.82$; $SD = 1.18$) were among the least important aspirations.

The aspirations of Iranian male and female students were similar. Statistically significant differences were found only in aesthetic goals: females ($M = 3.44$; $SD = .92$) were more interested in aesthetic aims than were males ($M = 2.90$; $SD = .98$; $t(334) = 5.182$, $p < .0001$).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Relationships among components of purpose

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations for all scales and factors. On average, even though Iranian students have found some purposes to which they are committed, they are still seeking new purposes. Correlations show that the components of purpose are positively related, with goal-directedness and finding purpose the strongest association, and goal-directedness and seeking purpose the weakest, as expected.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Purpose profiles

To identify purpose profiles of Iranian secondary students, a cluster analysis was conducted to classify participants according to their levels of finding and seeking purpose, goal-directedness, and beyond-the-self-orientation (BTS). We used a K-means algorithm, which involves the simplest partitioning algorithm that provides the benefits of ease of implementation, efficiency, and empirical success (Jain, 2010). Two-, three-, four-, and five-cluster solutions were tested. A four-cluster solution was selected since it provided theoretically sound groups (Naes, Brockhoff, & Tomic, 2010). Damon's (2008, pp. 59–60) and Moran's (2009) profiles were applied in labeling the clusters as (1) *self-oriented dabbler*, (2) *BTS-dreamer*, (3) *self-oriented life goal pursuer*, and (4) *purposeful*. The clustering variables differ statistically significantly across the four profiles (see Table 3), with medium and large effect sizes ranging from .32 to .52 (Cohen, 1992, p. 157).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 illustrates the profiles of the four clusters. The largest percentage of Iranian young people were identified as *self-oriented life goal pursuers* (37%). On average, these students had found a purpose in life, yet they were still searching for purpose as well. They were involved in realizing their purposes. However, their beyond-the-self orientation was weak, indicating little interest in social, societal, or religious matters. *Self-oriented dabblers* (24%) scored low, on average, on all four components of purpose. *BTS-dreamers* (21%), on average, were seeking a purpose oriented toward others, but they lacked involvement and realization of that purpose. The smallest cluster was the *purposeful* youth (18%) who, on average, had found a life purpose strongly oriented toward others, and they were committed to realizing it.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

This paper investigated Iranian secondary students' purpose in life and purpose profile. The endorsed categories of Iranian students' life purposes were similar to results found among American youth (Damon, 2008). Iranian students seem to value self-oriented goals the most: they want to have high-paying jobs, enjoy a high standard of living, and have an exciting life, in line with Schore's (2004) observation that twenty-first century adolescents belong to a materialistic generation for whom pleasurable feelings and making money plays an important role. In Iran, the high youth unemployment rate and economic crisis of the last decade (Salehi-Isfahani, 2011) also could be possible reasons motivating students to value future careers with high salaries and a comfortable life. However, this contrasts with the Islamic view that Muslims should not seek hedonistic and materialistic pleasures as a primary purpose in life (Joshani, 2013).

Feeling connected to family also was considered important, and it was the single-item primary source of meaning for both male and female students. This finding reflects previous studies that show, for 98 percent of Iranians, family is a significant source of love, emotional and financial support, and enjoyment in how they spend their time (Azadarmaki & Bahar, 2006). Furthermore, both Iran's collectivist culture and Islamic ethics value family and cohesiveness among family members (Gholami, Kuusisto & Tirri, 2014; *TFFTES*, 2011).

Social and religious goals did not seem as important for Iranian students as economic and hedonistic goals, a finding that contrasts with the ultimate goal of the Iranian educational system. This finding accords with research in Western countries where helping others is related more to personal well-being and career aspirations than to religious life goals (Manninen, Kuusisto, & Tirri, 2017). However, the association between helping others in need with religiousness and community volunteer work reflects one of the five pillars Muslims should follow in their daily lives (Rasool, 2000). It should be noted that male participants in this study were between the ages of 12 and 16 and are still young for religious obligations. Still, our data supports prior findings that obligation does not guarantee engagement in religious activities (Abd Ghani, Mohd Kosnin, & Abd Aziz, 2014).

Iranian students did not highlight aesthetic aims. Artistic purpose was the only category in which there was a significant difference between boys and girls, a finding in line with Ahmadi, Heidari, Bagherian, and Kashfi (2016). This relationship can also be found at the university level, where 88% of art majors are females (*Iran Newspaper*, 2016). Acting in public life, including having one's own business and being influential in politics, was also among the least valued purposes, although being committed to society and engaging in political participation are considered main values in Iranian school textbooks (Ebadollahi Chanzangah, Esmaeelzadeh, & Zarsazkar, 2011). According to the Iranian Minister of Sport

and Youth, only 31% of young people in Iran today are involved in social activities (Iranian Student News Agency, 2016).

The purpose profiles indicated that 55% of Iranian secondary students committed to a long-term life goal (self-oriented life goal pursuers and purposeful youth); 39% had aims that consider impact on others (purposeful youth and beyond-the-self dreamers), and 24% were dabbling in interests that did not cohere into an aspiration (self-oriented dabblers). The self-oriented life goal pursuers and the beyond-the-self dreamers reported they were still seeking: the dreamers needed an opportunity to engage their dream, but for the self-oriented group the unmet need was less clear.

These findings show that our Iranian sample had a higher percentage of students in self-oriented profiles (61%) than would be expected based on Islamic values or based on Western studies in which around 25% of the students are self-oriented (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Moran, 2009). Also, a clear nonpurposeful profile was not found in Iranian students, which is a disparity compared to previous U.S. studies that found nonpurposeful or disengaged samples from 25-40% (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016). This can be regarded as surprising especially in light of studies of Iranian youths' mental health (e.g. Emami et al., 2007).

However, this misalignment may be related to our measures, which were not able to distinguish dabblers from nonpurposeful youth since Ryff's scale (1989) does not address engagement. Furthermore, since Iranian dabblers scored low on all measurements, possibly nonpurposeful students were included in this category, in a similar way as Moran's (2009) study combined dabblers with nonpurposeful youth. Nevertheless, the overall result reflects an educational system designed to foster purpose and where teachers have a clear vision to do so (Kuusisto, Gholami, & Tirri, 2016).

Limitations and future studies

K-cluster analysis used in this study is an exploratory method, and some methodological challenges have been identified related to it. Nevertheless, students' purposes were studied also with factor analysis. This methodological triangulation and the fact that the results were in line with previous studies indicate validity of the results. Still, in the future, this study should be followed up with investigations using more rigorous quantitative methods, qualitative approaches, and larger sample sizes. Also, since findings suggested similarities to Western findings, the effect of globalization and media, especially the Internet, on Iranian youth's life purposes could be investigated, since the Internet is one of the main resources for exploring possible purposes available around the world.

Conclusion

According to the Iranian educational system, students are expected to be religious, be committed to Islamic rules and values, and feel responsible to others. However, this study suggests that many Iranian students are self-oriented and value hedonistic and economic life goals. Interestingly, students' aspirations were similar to results of Western studies. Education for purpose is an important part of moral education in schools. Iranian young people, like young people in Western countries, need education that stresses values that makes it possible to attain life goals beyond self-orientation and promotes commitment to these values.

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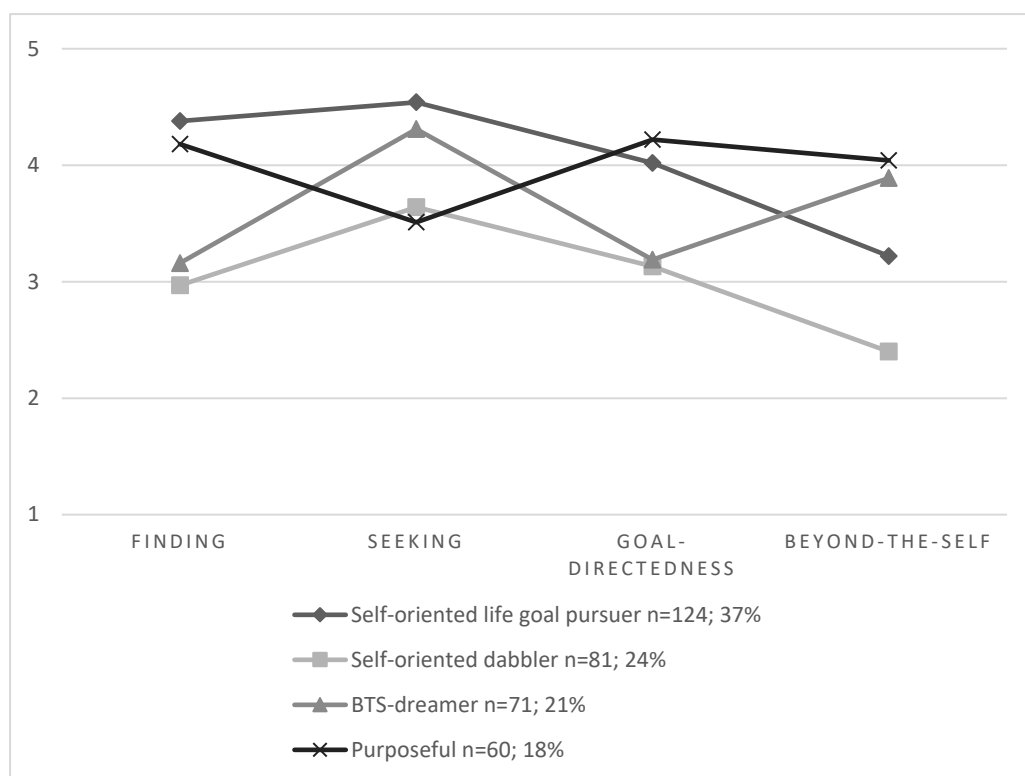


Figure 1. Iranian secondary students' purpose profiles from K-cluster analysis

Table 1.

Means, standard deviations, and alpha values of students' life goals

Life goal categories with items and life goals (scale 1-5)	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Factor loadings</i>	<i>Other strong loadings</i>
Economic and hedonistic ($\alpha = .609$)	4.42 (.60)		
2 Having new and different experiences	4.53 (.78)	.440	
4 Having a high-paying job	4.50 (.94)	.635	
3 Having an exciting lifestyle	4.41 (.00)	.471	
9 Having a high-status career	4.37 (1.07)	.431	
5 Having a high standard of living	4.29 (1.06)	.393	
19 <i>Having fun</i>	4.32 (1.11)	.282	
Family and relationships ($\alpha = .591$)	3.85 (1.16)		
14 <i>Having good relationships with my parents and my siblings</i>	4.61 (.93)	.355	
15 Having a satisfying marriage/relationship	4.29 (1.25)	.697	
7 Having children	3.41 (1.50)	.546	
Social and religious ($\alpha = .717$)	3.31 (.90)		
18 Helping others in need	4.28 (.95)	.462	.379 Economic and hedonistic
20 Becoming a community leader	3.30 (1.39)	.615	
17 Volunteering in the community	3.18 (1.31)	.678	
10 Devoting attention to my spiritual life	2.94 (1.48)	.516	.308 Family and relationships
16 Participating in religious activities	2.85 (1.37)	.617	
Aesthetics ($\alpha = .627$)	3.18 (.98)		
6 Being a good artist	3.69 (1.34)	.640	
8 Being a good musician	3.36 (1.51)	.579	
11 Being a good writer	2.88 (1.43)	.444	
1 Being a good actor or dancer	2.77 (1.44)	.539	
Acting in public life ($\alpha = .536$)	2.82 (1.18)		
13 Owning my own business	3.42 (1.47)	-.464	
12 Being influential in public affairs	2.20 (1.03)	-.841	

Items with italics were removed from the model due to low factor loading.

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics and Pearson's r correlations for components of purpose

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4
1 Finding purpose	3.75	.87	.761				
2 Seeking purpose	4.09	.78	.738	.166**			
3 Goal-directedness	3.67	.74	.748	.522**	.085		
4 Beyond-the-self	3.31	.90	.717	.169**	.187**	.178**	

** $p < .01$

Table 3.

Clusters of students' purpose profiles

		Self- oriented dabbler	BTS- dreamer	Self- oriented life goal pursuer	Purposeful	
		<i>n</i> = 81 (24%)	<i>n</i> = 71 (21%)	<i>n</i> = 124 (37%)	<i>n</i> = 60 (18%)	<i>F</i> , <i>p</i> , η_p^2
Finding purpose	<i>M</i>	2.97 _a	3.16 _a	4.38 _b	4.18 _b	120.458; .000; .521
	(<i>SD</i>)	(.75)	(.72)	(.43)	(.56)	
Seeking purpose	<i>M</i>	3.64	4.31 _a	4.53 _a	3.51	51.788; .000; .319
	(<i>SD</i>)	(.77)	(.53)	(.44)	(.90)	
Goal-directedness	<i>M</i>	3.13 _a	3.19 _a	4.02	4.22	72.269; .000; .395
	(<i>SD</i>)	(.74)	(.61)	(.51)	(.42)	
Beyond-the-self	<i>M</i>	2.40	3.89 _a	3.22	4.04 _a	92.631; .000; .456
	(<i>SD</i>)	(.65)	(.53)	(.76)	(.64)	

Note. Means within a row which share the same subscripts are not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level. Games-Howell (Field, 2013) pairwise post hoc comparisons were utilized, since variances were unequal.